

Models of Cultural Policy in Estonia

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Abstract

The paper explores the models of cultural policy that have existed in Estonia.

I – cultural policy from the national awakening (1860s-1880s) to the mid-1930s.

The cultural scene was influenced by the initiative of people, not so much by the purposeful shaping of it.

II – cultural policy from the mid-1930s to the beginning of 1990s: "(Pro)totalitarianism"

The mid-1930s brought along "the national-popular cultural policy" which was at the service of the prevailing ideology. When the Soviet regime was established after the occupation of Estonia, the model remained the same but it was the ideology embedded in it that changed.

III – cultural policy from the beginning of 1990s to the end of 1990s. According to the key concepts that characterise the model, it can be called "Transition and post-totalitarian absence of paradigm".

IV – cultural policy since 1995: "Preserving cultural policy."

Cultural policy interprets culture in terms of the activities of the established cultural institutions, not as an assemblage of numerous subcultures where the abundance and vitality of the subcultures would strengthen also the common cultural consciousness of the nation.

Keywords

Cultural policy models, transition, identity, Estonia.

Introduction

In my report I try to describe models of cultural policy that have existed or still exist in Estonia without attempting to offer practical solutions to problems of cultural policy. Instead I would like to highlight some connections between these models on the one hand, and the development of the society on the other. A more profound analysis of such connections could certainly produce outputs applicable in practice in a longer perspective.

In the current context cultural policy is understood as a system of social agreements on objectives established in culture and the ways and means of achieving them.

While studying Estonian history, four relatively clearly shaped models of cultural policy may be observed:

I - "Self-initiative and anarchy"-cultural policy from the period of national awakening (the 1860s – 1880) to the second half of the 1930s.

II – "(Pro)totalitarianism"¹ -from the second half of the 1930s to the middle of the 1990s.

III - "Post-totalitarian lack of paradigm" of the transition period (1991-1995)

IV – "Preserving cultural policy"- the existing model with provisional beginning in 1995.

“Self-Initiative and Anarchy”

In 2003 Mart Laar (ex-prime minister, historian) wrote, “In the same way as a human being acquires self-awareness, the emergence of national self-awareness is related to communication and interaction from one point of view and expression of personal will with another. /---/ whatever historic conditions have been responsible for the emergence of the nation, the most essential and the only inevitably necessary condition for the birth and development of nationalism is a living and active collective will”. (Laar 2003: 1571) Reviving “the memories of ancient freedom” and relying on various forms of national movement in the period of national awakening, Estonian farmers and intellectuals realised their common dream of an Estonian state. Their collective will received a short-lived expression in the Estonian Republic of 1918 – 1940.

Maimu Berg (writer) has described Estonia after the War of Independence in 1919 as a country devastated by war with the population suffering from hunger, alcoholism and venereal diseases. (Berg 2002: EPL) In that desperate situation collective campaigns involving the whole country contributed to building a nation state. Already before the years of independence there had been a strong abstinence movement. Now such additional actions were initiated as erecting numerous monuments to the War of Independence-, These were the network of education, youth, women’s, choral and music, farmers’, writers’, firemen’s, and other societies and organisations. Mart Laar has described the development of Estonia in those days as development based on the activity of societies. (Laar 2003: 1572)

The collective campaigns of those days were a genuine expression of the free will of people and initiatives deriving from it. In that sense those processes can be compared to the coping mechanism of contemporary civil society.

One of the most important campaigns of cultural policy of the 1920s – the foundation of the Cultural Endowment – was also launched on the initiative of writers. The law relating to this endowment was drafted and adopted in 1925. It is hard to overestimate the importance of the introduction of this law, it seems to have been one of the most fundamental expressions of democratic culture in the periods of the first Estonian Republic and restored independence.

Marin Laak (researcher of Estonian literature) has described the birth of the Cultural Endowment as follows, “The realisation of the idea of state funded salaries for writers in the form of a cultural endowment serving wider cultural interests took six years. Of the draft of the law that had been collectively prepared by people related to art and presented to the government in 1920 only a skeleton remained. In spite of the fact that the amendments were often not competent and were not approved by professional organisations, the act of Cultural Endowment passed in 1925 was oriented towards creative people and gave the endowment a right to decide about aesthetic priorities in its field. The statute of the Cultural Endowment was officially amended for five times within fifteen years (1925-1940), for the first time in the financial year 1927/28 and for the last time in 1939. All changes were related to the autonomy of the Cultural Endowment and moved towards greater bureaucratic hierarchy and ‘objectivity’”. (Laak 1996) The development of the Cultural Endowment was accompanied by angry debates and arguments between different ideologies and interest groups. In those processes it was easy to detect the change of the general political climate towards seclusion and management from above.

As a conclusion of that period, it may be said that at the beginning of the 1920s the nation-wide collective actions were initiated spontaneously and democratic processes could be observed-, during this emerging awareness the nation state was built, then at the beginning of the 1930s a firm tendency, in general as well as in cultural policy, towards national/popular culture could be noticed.

“(Pro)totalitarianism”

The (Pro)totalitarianism model was initiated by the national/popular cultural policy shaped by the government of K. Pääts (state elder, later president), which was expressed by powerful nation-wide actions of national (own culture) propaganda – translating names (including place names) into Estonian, propagating national costume in connection with the 11th Song Festival (1938); home improvement; studying ancient Estonian culture, etc. However, all those campaigns were managed from above and conducted with the support from Estonian Republic state authorities.

That stretch of time in the political history of Estonia has been described as the so-called period of silence under a pro-totalitarian government where elections were not held and political parties were banned. Cultural policy was also managed from above. In 1992 Jaan Ruus (movie critic) recollected that era as follows, “ Shall we live to see if we will get back to the Estonian Republic where film was just an imported entertainment and documentary was more like a display chronicle during the period of silence-” (Ruus 1992: 7)

A quotation from the world of literature illustrates that context even more expressively. The platform article “Literary side-notes” of Ed. Hubel, head of the board of the foundation of literature of the Cultural Endowment, may be interpreted as an attempt to find a compromise between state commission (power) and art (mind). He wrote, “Our literature gets justification for its existence from an original mind, unique manner. As long as we are original, our existence makes sense.” Also, “We have to preserve and cherish each piece of flint of our homeland, although we have to smooth it by European standards to make it shine and glitter like a jewel. It is time to give up admiring and spreading foreign beads of glass” (Laak 1996: 12)

The Cultural Endowment supported writers and artists and had, so to say, concurred with them, but in order to shape or develop Estonia’s own national culture it was planned to establish a nationwide network of uniform community centres by the Law of Community Centres of 1931. Regulations were issued concerning building, running and managing community centres. The state supported the building of community centres with loans given from a settlement fund. In addition to the settlement fund, social organisations and town and rural municipality governments could also get money for building and running community centres from the Cultural Endowment, borderland fund and the fund of the President.

In the compilation of articles “Estonia. 20 Years of Independence” we may read, “Community centres have played an important part as centres of local cultural work and homes of educational organisations. They have accommodated many organisations and their activity in such areas as libraries, theatre, music, lectures, courses, educational groups, and numerous others, whereas special emphasis has to be laid on their role in bigger events such as meetings and parties /---/.” (Kiis, 1997: 31)

By 1938 there were already more than 250 community centres. In order to apply the Law of Community Centres several regulations such as Regulation on Building Community Centres, Regulation on Regulating Community Centres were adopted. While shaping the

network it had to be kept in mind that a community centre had to be centrally located, available to citizens and within the range of action for at least 7 kilometres. According to the plan the network of community centres had to be accomplished by 1950.

At this point it should be mentioned that such network is really characteristic of Estonia only and this network has been considered a part of the wonder of cultural institutions mentioned by Jaak Allik, which “may be compared to Egyptian pyramids and deserve being preserved because of its uniqueness”. (Lagerspetz 2003: 1228)²

To sum up the first period of independence, it may be said that by 1940 there was a pro-totalitarian system of cultural policy in Estonia, which corresponded to Estonian homogeneous society and functioned perfectly in the context of the Europe of those days.

It was taken over by the Soviet authorities in 1940 and shaped according to their ideological views. The model of cultural policy did not change. - What was changed was the ideology within it.

The network of community centres was filled with Red Corners and sessions of political instruction. Leisure activities of Soviet people were supervised by ideologically educated Soviet cultural workers, and as the ideological slogan of the cultural policy of the Soviet period was “national in form, socialist in content”, they quietly dealt with traditional forms of national culture (choral singing, folk dance, handicraft). This all happened within the framework of public procurement and state funding those fields became professionalised.³

Culture was made to function as a propaganda tool. However due to the strong network of community centres, which supported national culture and people’s well-developed need to deal with their own culture, thus cultural life, being state funded and available to all, paradoxically functioned as a hidden channel of a national resistance movement. This culminated during songs festivals held every five years, celebrating the strength of national identity and reflecting the growing aspirations for independence. This mechanism is also considered to have helped to regain independence.

Estonian cultural heritage was maintained in spite of the Russification policy and an attempt to assimilate Estonian people into the single mass of Soviet people. According to Lagerspetz, the self-evident foundation of Soviet cultural policy was a hierarchical structure and strong centralisation, which attempted to achieve the rise of common consciousness and unified way of life, considering a monolithic society as its ideal. (Lagerspetz 2003: 1227).

“Post-Totalitarian Lack of Paradigm” (1991-1995)

C. Offe who has characterised post-socialist societies, has described the events taking place in them as triple-transformation where simultaneously political, economic and cultural as well as national identity change. (Lagerspetz 1998).

Such transformation differs greatly from any earlier experience in the process of democratisation and for Estonian people that period was a challenging ordeal, which did not end successfully for everybody. The complexity of the period is also illustrated by statistical data, which was the most problematic in 1994 when there was a high number of suicides, a sharp increase in the number of deaths and a drastic decrease in the number of births.

An important task of that period – to legitimise new economic and political institutions with the assistance of a new cultural identity common to all members of the nation – could not be brought into agreement with the aggravation of cultural splintering. An obvious paradox became evident. This paradox was that the democratic and independent social order supported national identity considerably less than the hidden resistance to a repressive regime, where the survival strategy of Estonians had consisted in assembling around cultural institutions. (Lagerspetz 1998).

People involved in culture also sharply perceived the lack of pervasive ideology, which would have allowed them to take sides - either for or against. Already in 1994 Ants Juske (art critic and curator) wrote, “/---/ we are still not accustomed to living without an ideology. Now that the time of national ideology is almost over, our cultural figures are overwhelmed by “concern ideology”. The latter is very tightly connected with the ideologies of socialism as well as singing revolution. /---/ Still this superannuated attitude that there has to be an ideology holding the whole culture or nation together. /---/ On the other hand we can see that a new generation happily grows who /---/ does not care much whether adjective “national” or “socialist” is attached to words, a better part of them does not even take any interest in the word “market”. (Juske 1994: 559-560).

An essential phenomenon characteristic of that period was also an initial shock of figures of culture, which accompanied the transfer from completely funded social order to market economy, although partial public funding of cultural institutions continued. Adjusting to the rules of market and learning to cope in those conditions still goes on among older and middle age generations.

Futhermore, there are some common features of cultural policy of transition societies, which are also clearly represented in Estonia: lack of carefully considered cultural policy; incomprehensible funding; monopolistic cultural institutions enjoying state support and little capability of the third sector; inconsistent legislation of culture; cinematic art has one foot in the grave and cinema buildings are being sold; decrease in the prestige of culture and an attack of commerce.

The most important step of that critical period was **the restoration of the activity of the Cultural Endowment in 1994.**

The Cultural Endowment became an efficient democratic activator of cultural processes, since it supported initiative coming from outside the state institutions before the “General Principles of Cultural Policy of Estonian State” was worked out under the leadership of Jaak Allik and the Parliament adopted it in 1998.

Since then it is possible to speak about a new model of cultural policy, which differs from the previous one mainly in the existence of the official foundation document “General Principles...” and state funding to follow its principles.

“Preserving cultural policy” 1995 -

The third model provisionally started in 1995 when the then Minister of Culture without portfolio Jaak Allik compared the Estonian legacy of the network of community centres with Egyptian pyramids, which in its uniqueness deserves to be preserved. Three years later Jaak Allik spoke about “careful maintenance and *preservation* of the current cultural landscape as the basic task of official cultural policy.” (Lagerspetz 2003: 1228) This can be considered a cultural policy directed towards preserving the preceding models.

The succeeding ministers of culture have generally shared the view about the *preservation* of cultural traditions as the main goal of national cultural policy although none of them has dealt with cultural policy as thoroughly as Jaak Allik did in 1995 – 1999.

Since then the leadership of cultural policy has belonged to the politicians of the Reform Party, whose essential of the policy seems to be to let things proceed by themselves. At least they have not informed the public about their complete cultural policy. As a visionary of cultural policy of the Reform Party Rein Lang (politician) claims, “I and people sharing my views value the nation’s ability to fight. It means that state will only pay attention to professional culture. Another approach would be valuing the so-called Yaroslavl art ensemble’s culture. People who are attempting to establish their principles again practise this culture. It means that everything has to be supervised, managed, supported. Priorities have not been defined. In the central position of the so-called Yaroslavl art ensemble’s culture is song festival, which may become a fetish of some kind. In the present-day context song festival could be a purely commercial event, I do not see the point why the state should be involved. If a person wants to sing or dance, it is his or her own purely personal matter. I do not give the employees of my firm a day off to participate and I do not pay them for it. Estonian people are personality-centred, prone to capitalism and open to the world. If we proceed from that, the “Yaroslavl art ensemble’s culture” is imposed on us and that culture is indeed extremely boring.” (Lang 1995: 2)

Lang’s train of thought is characteristic of the right-wing vision of cultural policy at the beginning of the 1990s: although he recognises the essence of totalitarian cultural policy and calls it “Yaroslavl art ensemble’s culture”, he considers professional culture the only thinkable cultural state priority, thus leaving national and popular culture as “purely personal matter of each individual” out of the discussion. This is obviously matched by the vision of the Reform Party who steers Estonian cultural policy from 1999 until now, so we can conclusively call it the **model of elitist-preserving cultural policy**.

People applying this model may be characterised by their continuous ambition to centralise the activity of the Cultural Endowment and make it an extension of the ministry. They seem to show an unwillingness to establish favourable relations between culture and business at a national level (e.g. Estonian legislation does not motivate business people to support-sponsor culture), inconsistency in regulating national or popular (own) culture and, finally, lack of systematic analysis of cultural policy.

Conclusion

The problems of the current cultural policy naturally derive from the fact that Estonia has little experience of democratically functioning cultural policy as compared to other models managed from above.

The system that was once worked out to maintain a monolithic and homogeneous society is retained at any cost, although our society has become heterogeneous and multicultural and has its own nation state.

According to the assessment of M. Lagerspetz it may be stated that Estonian decisions of cultural policy have mainly been motivated by the aim to retain the existing cultural institutions. Lagerspetz has explained the attempt to keep old cultural institutions with the fact that preservation of culture has acquired an important role in the process of

nation-building. “/---/ it has become customary to claim that the main idea of the existence of the Estonian state is in assuring the “preservation of culture through times”, as expressed by the preamble of the constitution. There is a short distance from this explanation to the answer that the main task of the state-supported culture is to contribute to ensuring the continuity of the state.” (Lagerspetz 2003: 1228)

What explains the cultural policy focusing on retaining and nation-building, and is it only characteristic of Estonia only or can similar tendencies be found elsewhere as well?

Apparently the most influential motive for preserving the status quo at any cost is fear – the fear to lose our own language, culture, nation state in the globalising world – and on the other hand, due to the lack of systematic analysis, an ignorance about other possibilities.

Similar tension is also present in other small post-socialist states. Professor of Philosophy of the University of Kaunas, L. Donskis (2003) has thoroughly analysed challenges Lithuania faces in the 21st century, focusing mainly on studying the logic between nationalism and globalisation. He admits that uncertainty, social stress, new logic of self-perception and challenges they pose to cultural traditions may make the 21st century into a decisive test for Lithuanian identity. (Donskis 2003: 85)

The problems of the new logic of self-perception in the former Eastern block countries are strikingly described in the appeal of well-known intellectuals (Habermas, Derrida, Eco, Mushg, Savater, Rorty, et al.) to the European Union to develop a considerable political counterbalance to the endeavours of unilateral hegemony of the USA in world politics. In that appeal the notion of “core Europe” is used in order to distinguish from the new member countries with their legacy of “national idiocy”, which may be historically understood but belongs to the past from the point of view of “core Europe”. Mati Sirkel (writer and translator) has written that the above appeal proceeds from the presumption that the time of traditional nation states is over and all kinds of separatist or isolation tendencies are counter-indicative to the concept of unified Europe. (Sirkel 2003: 1230)

Leonidas Donskis in his profound analysis of the challenges facing Lithuania has reached the conviction that nation states will not disappear. In the period between two world wars the Lithuanian Republic had to apply for international recognition and partnership in Europe. But today nobody doubts in the existence of modern Lithuanian people or their right to their own state, language, collective identity and cultural continuity. Donskis does not believe any of the tales about the end of nationalism and nation state in Europe nor anywhere in the world. In Donskis`opinion the 20th century was the century of the collapse of empires and the emergence of new states. He believes that in the 21st century the number of new states continues to grow. (Donskis 2003: 83)

There is no reason to be afraid of either open or hidden programmatic linguistic-cultural assimilation in the European Union, which is proved by the fact that there is no common cultural policy in the European Union, there is a possibility to apply for direct aid through such programmes as “Culture 2000” or structural funds. It means that countries themselves decide about their cultural policy, which places special responsibility on cultural policy of each country, since retaining of cultural uniqueness and even survival is the responsibility of each individual member country.

Mati Sirkel claims that the process of assimilation is gradually and efficiently steered by economic levers within the common labour market and globalisation in the Anglo-American spirit. (Sirkel 2003: 1230) It is from the point of view of economic context – since there is currently not and will not be considerable art and cultural industry in

Estonia - that the existing **elitist-preserving model of cultural policy** is understandable, but on the other hand, taking into account economic levers, it is short-sighted.

Short-sighted because of the fact that current elitist-preserving cultural policy handles culture as the activity of well-established cultural institutions, not as a body of many subcultures⁴, where the abundance and vitality of those subcultures would strengthen the common consciousness of the nation through promoting local cultural industry.

It means that only well-established state funded cultural organisations (and their subcultures, which have managed to legitimise themselves in the eyes of the established culture) are able to “supply” culture; whereas the pricing policy of the state attempts to guarantee the “consumption” of culture. The alternative “suppliers” and “consumers” outside of that circle have to cope by themselves. The dynamics of culture is inhibited and participation in cultural life is restricted, which allows an increasing invasion of assimilating mass culture and cultural industry of Anglo-American origin.

Notes

¹The idea to determine that the beginning of this period was in the middle of the 1930s rather than in 1940, which is usually considered the year of the change in political paradigm, was given by Tiit Hennoste's (linguist) observations about Estonian language policy (Hennoste 1999).

²This actually gives rise to a set of problems current cultural policy is wrestling with – what has to be done with the community centres? Intensive discussion about national culture also takes place, in which state funded organisations of national culture, staff of community centres and ideologists of 'own culture' of Viljandi academy of Culture have been involved.

³Ideologists of 'own culture' consider the alienation of people from national culture and a threat to its sustainability a result of ideologisation and professionalisation.

⁴In the present context subculture is understood as club culture or the culture of Kihnu island.

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